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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: FIRST ENVIRONMENT SUMMIT EXPOSES PROBLEMS

REF: ABUJA 2275

¶1. Summary: From October 20-21, 2008 the Nigerian government (GON) hosted its first ever environmental summit where participants from the federal and state governments, civil society and academics assessed the environment and discussed approaches for sustainable development. The summit provided a forum for lively and spirited discussions, where several environmental NGOs and academics criticized the GON for lack of vision and paying lip service to protecting the environment. The forum concluded with the signing of a 23-point national environmental pledge and with a recommendation to integrate the environment into the national agenda. A promised action plan is still being debated. The overall assessment of observers is that Nigeria is unlikely to meet several of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly reducing by half the number of the people without sustainable access to safe drinking water by 2015. End Summary

THE STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

¶2. The summit, which was officially inaugurated by Vice President Goodluck Jonathan, identified deforestation and land degradation; drought and desertification, flooding and soil erosion; oil, gas and industrial pollution; and urban decay and municipal waste as the main environmental challenges that Nigeria faces. Additionally, the country's large population (140 million in 2006), rapid population growth rate of 3%, significant rural to urban migration, unsustainable agricultural practices, and lack of proper hazardous waste management were identified as exacerbating the situation. According to a study presented by Professor Olusola Ojo from the Department of Geography at the University of Ibadan, these adverse conditions are resulting in climate change in Nigeria and unless urgently addressed pose significant threat to the sustainable development of the country and its security. He urged the GON to strengthen and enforce its environmental standards in order to improve the current "unacceptable" state of the environment and impending future threats.

DEPLETING WATER RESOURCES AND POOR MANAGEMENT

¶3. Data provided at the summit indicates that only 35% of the rural and 50% of urban populations have access to reliable water supply. According to Professor Ojo, surface and groundwater contamination and depleting water resources are major challenges and a potential source of conflict, especially in rural areas. He pointed out the state water agencies lack adequate capacity and resources to address these challenges. In the urban setting, lack of effective planning, ageing pipes, and unreliable supply of electricity for water treatment were identified as the main problems. Professor Oladele Osibanjo, Regional Coordinator for the Basel Convention, stated that "unless drastic measures are taken Nigeria is unlikely to attain the Millennium Development Goal (MDGs), particularly reducing by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015."

NORTHERN NIGERIA TURNING INTO A DESERT

14. According to GON estimates, the process of desertification in northern Nigeria due to climatic variations (recurring drought) and unsustainable human activities (deforestation and overgrazing), is expanding at an alarming rate of .06 Kilometers per year. Nine states (Bauchi, Borno, Jigawa, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara) are officially designated as desertification front line states (DFSs). These states have a combined population of 34 million and account for 38% of Nigeria's total land mass. To counter desertification and support economic activity in the DFS states, the GON established in the 1970s the River Basin Authorities (RBDAs) and embarked on the construction of large dams and pumping stations.

15. By 1990, the RBDAs had built 162 dams with a total capacity sufficient to irrigate 725,000 hectares. However, the sites chosen didn't always have sufficient irrigable land nearby. Consequently, only 293,117 were developed out of which only 218,000 hectares are regularly irrigated. Professor Ojo described these large public-run and capital intensive projects "disappointing, and negatively affecting the hydrology of the downstream areas, accentuating the desertification process." To combat further desert encroachment, the GON has introduced the Greenbelt Program, a project to establish a 1,500 km shelterbelt across the extreme north part of the country (from Kebbi State in the west to Borno State in the east) covering the desertification frontline states. Several nurseries have been established in the frontline and buffer states with each nursery capable of producing up to 1 million seedlings per annum. Hundreds of thousands of trees have been planted, since the program's establishment in 2004 but there is no clear data to evaluate the success of the program. (Note: the Ambassador has promoted the

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planting of trees through active participation in the Abuja Greening Project, a tree planting project in the capital city. End Note).

16. Several states in the south suffer from gully erosion and landslides. According to recent press reports, the government has declared south east Nigeria an ecological disaster zone. Following an October 29 meeting, Vice President Jonathan and the governors of five affected states (Anambra, Ebonyi, Imo, Abia, and Enugu) agreed to set up a committee to improve the situation.

COASTAL AND MARINE POLLUTION

17. Experts contend that activities related to the oil and gas industry in the ecologically sensitive Niger delta cause serious pollution to marine resources. According to Professor Osibanjo, incessant oil spills (largely from illegal oil bunkering) pollute natural and drinking water sources and destroy farmlands. Other causes include dumping wastes and discharges into the sea, gas flaring and emission from power generation. Lack of proper waste disposal facilities, weak regulations and penalties and poor enforcement are additional challenges. He recommended that the Nigerian government develop and implement a comprehensive institutional framework to prevent coastal and marine pollution, including at Nigeria's main sea ports. The Nigerian Oil Spills Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) lacks resources and institutional capacity to counter marine pollution. (Note: In January 2009, the U.S. Mission will receive a Science Fellow from the U.S. Department of Energy with expertise in oil spill detection and recovery. The Fellow will be detailed to NOSDRA for six weeks to help build the agency's capacity. End Note).

INADEQUATE WASTE DISPOSAL AND MANAGEMENT

18. According to various speakers, Nigeria generally practices waste disposal rather than waste management. Municipal solid waste is an intractable problem beyond the capacity of most municipal and state governments. Disposal of waste without segregation is the norm and as a result is causing significant damages to the environment. Leachates from refuse dumps percolate into and contaminate the surface and groundwater leading to public health problems in various

communities.

¶ 9. Electronic waste is a new growing hazard. Data from presentations at the summit demonstrate that 400,000 used computers enter the country monthly, of which only 25% are functional. Crude methods are being used to repair or recover precious metals from the unserviceable used computers while the rest is burnt or dumped mainly in the Lagos area. Professor Osibanjo said "a chemical time bomb is ticking from an old industrial solid waste dumped in Lalupon local government area in Oyo State." The Osibanjo asserted that West African Battery Limited, a defunct acid battery manufacturing plant, dumped waste containing 8-10% lead (confirmed by lab analysis) close to highly populated villages around Lalupon, causing significant threat to children and pregnant women. The main challenges to effective waste management are lack of resources, adequate infrastructure (waste collection, treatment, and disposal facilities), and public awareness.

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Comment

¶ 10. The summit served as an excellent platform for frank exchanges between the GON and various stakeholders. It concluded with a recommendation to integrate the environment into the national agenda and the signing of a 23-point national environmental pledge. If followed through with concrete measures, these steps will go a long way to address the myriad of environmental challenges that Nigeria faces.

¶ 11. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.

SANDERS